DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 724 RC 020 484

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TITLE Departmental Assessment at the Small College.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 7p.; In: A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement 1995; see ED 382 117.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *Departments; *Educational Assessment; *Faculty Development; *Formative Evaluation; Higher Education; Program Evaluation; School Effectiveness; *Self Evaluation (Groups); *Small Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Northwestern College IA

ABSTRACT

A good college assessment program should include departmental level assessment to evaluate what students learn in their major field. Small colleges have unique opportunities and constraints in developing departmental assessment programs. Because of their size, small departments can use labor-intensive methods and have more opportunities for faculty to work together. On the other hand, statistical analysis is problematic and identifying an assessment advocate in each department is difficult. Northwestern College in Iowa, with 1,100 students and 62 full-time faculty members, implemented an assessment program that included departmental assessment. Departments were to identify educational goals, ways to measure learning, and a process for analyzing information and making changes. The lessons learned from this experience are that: (1) an assessment program should include faculty development since many faculty members do not understand assessment; (2) faculty may resist assessment, but there are ways to address this; (3) a one-size-fits-all assessment program is neither possible nor desirable, because departments must have flexibility; (4) an assessment advocate should be identified for each department or cluster of related departments; (5) departments should avoid minimalist programs that aren't useful and ambitious programs that can't be implemented; and (6) each department should produce a product that links assessment evidence to desired improvements in curriculum and educational practices. (TD)

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DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT AT THE SMALL COLLEGE

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Assessment is about student learning. Much of our attention has been directed to assessing progress toward general education goals and objectives, but it is also essential to assess what students learn in their major field. A good assessment program, therefore, should include departmental assessment. This paper relates the experiences--both positive and negative--of one small liberal arts college that has implemented a departmental assessment program as one component of an overall assessment plan. Herein are described lessons we learned that may guide or warn other institutions embarking on this journey.

Small colleges have some unique opportunities and constraints in developing departmental assessment programs. The opportunities come from the fact that most departments have only a small number of majors, so they can perhaps use some relatively labor-intensive methods without too much burden on the faculty. There are also more opportunities in small colleges for departments to work together on assessment. The constraints arise in several areas. For one thing, the small number of majors renders some assessment techniques problemmatic, especially those that allow for or require statistical analysis. In this regard, comparing a handful of majors with national norm groups is risky. Another constraint comes from the fact that it may be more difficult to identify an "assessment advocate" in each department, a strategy that works well in larger units.

These reflections are based on the experience of Northwestern College (Iowa), which is a church-related college of 1,100 students and 62 full-time faculty members. The College's assessment plan was approved by NCA in 1993, and includes a provision that each department will develop and implement its own assessment program for student majors. These plans were developed during the 1993-94 academic year, with implementation beginning in 1994-95. Preliminary plans were submitted to the campus-wide Assessment Committee for review and approval. The departments are quite small, with two or three faculty members and twenty or thirty majors.

Departments were given some guidelines for developing their assessment plans (see Exhibit A). In brief, the departments were asked to identify educational goals for their majors, to identify ways to measure learning (preferably with multiple means of assessment), and to indicate a continuing process by which the department was to

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analyze the information and make changes in curriculum or educational practices.

LESSON # 1 - Many faculty members do not understand what assessment is, why it is important, and how it can help them in their teaching. There is a need, therefore, for an active program of faculty development as part of building an assessment plan. This faculty development can also have direct benefits for teaching effectiveness.

Academic administrators have certainly been deluged with assessment materials, but most faculty members have not heard much about assessment through their professional organizations or their professional reading. Consequently, few faculty members have enough knowledge about assessment to begin building an effective departmental program. Furthermore, those who know a little about assessment often have a stereotypical view to which they are strongly resistant (see Lesson 2 below).

For example, is it quite clear from the assessment literature that assessment must begin with establishing educational goals. However, a brief survey of course descriptions and syllabi will demonstrate that many faculty members view education from the perspective of inputs (what will be covered) rather than outcomes (what will be learned). Indeed, one of the more troublesome stages in our experience of departmental assessment came when we asked departments to identify their educational goals. For many departments, this was the first time they had given much thought to articulating the kinds of student learning they desired. A helpful strategy in this regard was to have groups of departments meet together to share their goals, so they those who were uncomfortable with the idea of goals could learn from those who were more adept in this area.

It is critical, therefore, to begin with a faculty development program which outlines the whys and wherefores of assessment. In other words, institutions must begin building a climate of assessment on campus. Well before there was any talk of an assessment program, the Academic Dean devoted part of several addresses to the faculty and part of several monthly newsletters to the faculty asking questions about the extent and type of student learning. Secondly, we held meetings with each academic cluster (a loose arrangement of related departments) to ask them what kinds of evidence they already gather about student learning. The focus was not on fancy or sophisticated techniques of gathering evidence, but it was on how much

evidence is already gathered. Shortly after these cluster meetings, more than a fourth of the faculty attended a regional faculty development workshop on assessment. On the one hand, this proved to be scary for some because there was so much talk about assessment techniques; on the other hand, many were able to relate this new information to the earlier discussions on campus about student learning. Finally, when the time came to develop department assessment plans, either the Academic Dean or the faculty assessment coordinator met individually with most departments to provide direction and respond to preliminary drafts.

It is clear that this faculty development work must continue beyond the development of these assessment plans to their implementation. For example, several departments have indicated an interest in using student portfolios. It is obvious that several departments have not thought very carefully about how to build a portfolio project and how to use this information for the purposes of improvement. We scheduled additional sessions with these departments, looking at how they could develop course assignments that would relate closely to departmental goals and that would demonstrate student growth from the freshmen/sophomore courses to the junior/senior courses. In addition, we discussed how to evaluate portfolios, drawing on the experience of departments (Art, English) that had been using portfolios for several years.

LESSON # 2 - <u>There will be significant faculty resistance to assessment, but there are some effective ways to address this resistance.</u>

How many faculty members does it take to change a light bulb? Change???

Faculty resistance to assessment will come in several forms. First, many have biased views of assessment to begin with, seeing assessment largely in terms of paper-and-pencil multiple choice tests that may or may not "cover" what faculty members think is important. Second, faculty are (often rightly) resistant to any new labor-intensive projects, especially those imposed by administrators or external agencies. Third, resistance comes from those who argue that the most important educational impacts on students either come years after graduation or do not lend themselves to empirical measurement. Finally, faculty members fear that assessment results will affect promotion and tenure decisions, so that they will be punished for having incompetent or lazy students.

How can we address these concerns? The most important strategy is that assessment, from the very beginning, must be tied in as closely as possible with student learning. It

is essential to start with the question of what students learn, both in individual courses and in sequences of courses. Even the most assessment-resistant faculty member will be interested in the extent of student learning, and the vast majority will be interested in efforts to increase that learning. To begin by talking about assessment rather than about student learning is to make a fatal mistake. The "A-word" should be used sparingly, if at all, in the early stages. Even the words we use can trigger anxiety. For example, to relieve the fears of the non-science faculty members, it is better to talk not about gathering data but about gathering evidence.

Another important strategy is to build an assessment program on evidence that is already available and on assignments that already exist in courses. In other words, rather than introducing new tests, new surveys, or new student papers/projects, it is more effective to begin with assignments and tests that already occur, provided that these bear some relationship to course and departmental goals for student learning. For example, some of our meetings with departments have started by looking at syllabi, tests, and paper/project assignments to see how they can be used or modified slightly to develop a pattern of evidence about what students learn. In some instances we have been able to show how a paper assignment in an introductory course could be used in combination with a paper assignment in an upper-level course to assess student growth from freshman to senior year. Faculty members will be much more receptive to making changes in assignments they already use than they will be to creating new assignments or adding assessment techniques that are not course-based.

To relieve faculty fears that assessment will affect faculty evaluations, there are a variety of approaches that can be used. Perhaps the most important is to separate as clearly as possible the evidence gathered from assessment and the evidence gathered for faculty reviews. Assessment results should not be in faculty personnel files, unless the faculty member chooses to submit them. Another strategy is to have different people involved in these two processes. For example, having the Academic Dean on both the assessment committee and the personnel committee could give the wrong message to faculty members. It might also be better to have someone other than the department chairperson coordinating the departmental assessment efforts.

LESSON # 3 - <u>Departments must have significant flexibility to use a variety of assessment measures. In other words, a one-size-fits-all assessment program is neither possible nor desirable.</u>

Departments differ in their educational goals, and their assessment programs should reflect these differences. Some disciplines are more content-oriented, some are more skill-oriented; some are more theoretical, some more applied, and so forth. To force departments into a common assessment mold will be frustrating and fruitless.

Using some kind of standardized exam (like the GRE) may not work well with some very small departments because the limited number of courses offered in the curiculum may not match the coverage of the test questions. Perhaps only the larger departments, with more comprehensive curricula, should be encouraged to use standardized exams.

Small departments with only a handful of majors will not learn very much from assessment techniques that rely on advanced statistical analysis. On the other hand, small departments can more easily employ such labor-intensive approaches such as portfolios and freshman/senior interviews.

LESSON # 4 - Identify an "assessment advocate" in each department or cluster of related departments.

The literature on organizational change is pretty clear in recommending that top-down changes are less effective than changes which come from within the units themselves. This suggests that Deans, department chairpersons, or institutional research directors should not be the prime movers in the assessment efforts.

An effective strategy will be to identify in each department a faculty member who is or could become sympathetic to assessment and have that person coordinate the efforts. In the case of very small departments where no one is a likely candidate for this honor, perhaps a faculty member from a closely-related department could be identified. In our experience, we did this more effectively in constituting the campus-wide assessment committee than we did in launching department assessment efforts; consequently we ran into some department chairpersons who, like congressional committee chairpersons, ignored the issue or put huge obstacles in the way of departmental progress.

LESSON # 5 - Departments need to avoid the extremes of a minimalist program that won't tell them anything useful and an ambitious program that will be impossible to implement effectively.

Our experience has been that some departments will try to get by with as little as possible but that other departments will bite off more than they can chew. In general, it seems better to start small and build from there, rather than to embark on an ambitious program that will stretch human and fiscal resources and might endanger whatever good will has been developed toward assessment.

LESSON # 6 - Don't forget the feedback loop.

One of the more common problems in assessment is that so much effort is focused on gathering evidence of student learning that there is little time or energy for analyzing the evidence and making suggestions for improvement. It is too easy to forget that the primary purpose of assessment is to enhance learning through improvements in curriculum and educational practices.

We have found that departments tend to let the evidence gather dust on the shelves rather than take the time to analyze and make improvements. It is so easy to think that the departments can use the week after graduation to take on this project, but the fatigue factor is high. In some ways the week before school starts in the fall would be better, as faculty members are fresher and they are thinking about learning goals for their students.

The key is to have each department produce a product that will demonstrate that they have reviewed the assessment evidence and have thought about the implications for the curriculum and their pedagogical practices. We have employed a standard form that departments are expected to submit to the Assessment Committee by mid-term of the fall semester in alternate years. The form asks for a description of the information the department gathered, a summary of the analysis of the evidence, and a reflective statement of the implications for curriculum and educational practice.